

AIR WAR COLLEGE

AIR UNIVERSITY

FREE INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA:  
A DUAL-EDGED SWORD

by

Dawn Alonso, Lieutenant Colonel, USMC

A Research Report Submitted to the Faculty

In Partial Fulfillment of the Graduation Requirements

Advisor: Dr. Naunihal Singh

13 February 2014

## **DISCLAIMER**

The views expressed in this academic research paper are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the US government, the Department of Defense, or Air University. In accordance with Air Force Instruction 51-303, it is not copyrighted, but is the property of the United States government.



## Biography

Lieutenant Colonel Dawn Alonso is assigned to the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB, AL. She has served in the Marine Corps for 21 years as a Marine Air Ground Task Force Intelligence Officer. Lieutenant Colonel Alonso's billets include All-Source Fusion Team Leader (II MEF G2), Intelligence Plans Officer (CENTCOM J-3), All-Source Fusion Platoon Commander (3d Intelligence Bn), Production and Analysis Company Commander (3d Intelligence Bn), Plans Officer (III MEF G2), Staff Secretary (CG III MEF), 31<sup>st</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit S-2, G2 Operations Officer (I MEF). She most recently served as the Commanding Officer, 1<sup>st</sup> Intelligence Bn. Her combat deployments include Operations DESERT SHIELD/STORM, IRAQI FREEDOM, and ENDURING FREEDOM.

Lieutenant Colonel Alonso earned a Master's of Science in Strategic Intelligence from the National Defense Intelligence College (2007) and Bachelor's Degree in International Affairs from Penn State University (1993).



## **Abstract**

The impact of the internet and social media tools on authoritarian regimes and would be revolutionaries remains a hotly debated topic even after a decade of widespread internet access. This paper argues that dissidents' use of the Internet and social media tools undermines authoritarian power, however the state will likely retain the advantage. First, to frame the argument, it is useful to examine past information communication technologies (ICT) by exploring their nature, uses, and impacts on states and society. Secondly, the historical overview enables a more insightful examination into the nature, potential uses and debate over the usefulness of the internet and social media in undermining authoritarianism. Thirdly, a discussion of the online tit for tat between authoritarian regimes and disgruntled masses in China and Syria reveals several offensive and defensive uses as well as challenges in gaining an online advantage. Finally, these cases combined with the historical lens lead to key points for consideration as U.S. policy makers actively promote the spread of democracy via the internet and social media.



## **Introduction**

The impact of the internet and social media tools on authoritarian regimes and would be revolutionaries remains a hotly debated topic even after a decade of widespread internet access. On one side of the debate, utopians believe these technologies facilitate cultural understanding, peace, prosperity and the spread democracy. The skeptics contend that the angry masses conduct revolutions and the usefulness of the internet and social media in defeating authoritarianism is just “hype.”<sup>1</sup> These binary views fail to consider a more complex reality in which authoritarian regimes and dissidents engage in an online tit for tat to gain an advantage offline. This paper argues that dissidents’ use of the Internet and social media tools undermines authoritarian power, however the state will likely retain the advantage. First, to frame the argument, it is useful to examine past information communication technologies (ICT) by exploring their nature, uses, and impacts on states and society. Secondly, the historical overview enables a more insightful examination into the nature, potential uses and debate over the usefulness of the internet and social media in undermining authoritarianism. Thirdly, a discussion of the online tit for tat between authoritarian regimes and disgruntled masses in China and Syria reveals several offensive and defensive uses as well as challenges in gaining an online advantage. Finally, these cases combined with the historical lens lead to key points for consideration as U.S. policy makers actively promote the spread of democracy via the internet and social media.

## **Historical Uses Of Information Communication Technologies**

To understand the impact of ICTs in today’s information environment, one must explore the nature, offensive and defensive uses, and the varying impacts on authoritarian regimes and societies throughout history. To clarify, an ICT’s nature refers to the direction of information flow between the regime and the masses. Depending on each ICT’s nature, an authoritarian

regime has several offensive and defensive options to manipulate information in order to maintain control over society. For the purposes of this paper, defensive uses refers to any measures taken by a regime to restrict the spread of unacceptable information in order to undermine dissident mobilization. Offensive uses refer to activities that target an audience either through information dissemination such as propaganda, or through tracking and surveillance in order to intimidate and punish dissident activity.

### **Printing Press**

Gutenberg's fifteenth century printing press may represent the only ICT to spark a true information revolution - one that radically transformed European politics and society by defeating authoritarianism. Prior to the printing press, the Catholic Church monopolized production, dissemination and substance of all written information thereby controlling the beliefs of an illiterate society. This information dominance occurred since only monks reproduced documents by hand. Monasteries, seminaries and universities then translated and transcribed documents to Latin for the literate elite. Priests then verbally disseminated the Church's desired message to the masses in sermons. This top-down information flow severely limited popular dissent by perpetuating illiteracy. Would be dissenters would have been restricted to person-to-person verbal communication which was easily detectable due to church spies or devoted Catholics willing to report their neighbors. The Church met any hint of dissent or popular mobilization with violence and extreme prejudice.<sup>2</sup>

The availability of written words increased dramatically with Gutenberg's moveable type printing press in 1450. In the press' first fifty years, approximately 20 million books were printed surpassing the estimated total from the previous one thousand years. The Holy Bible was mass-produced for the first time leading to literacy, alternate interpretations, and increased questioning

of the Church's real authority.<sup>3</sup> Enlightened society and dissidents gained an offensive advantage resulting in a popular uprising by Martin Luther who surreptitiously nailed his 95 theses on a church door in Germany.<sup>4</sup> Within two months, copies proliferated throughout Europe leading to the Protestant Reformation. Luther's protestors also covertly distributed mass-produced posters and flyers attacking the Church while John Calvin leveraged the press' power to expose his version of Protestantism.<sup>5</sup>

The Catholic Church's seven hundred years of top-down information dominance gradually lost sway despite defensive measures. To protect society from "heretical" information, the Church issued An *Index of Forbidden Books*, printing licenses, and rewards for censorship for printers and booksellers. However, high demand and prospective profits overcame fears of arrest, torture and death. In fact, printers widened the market by publishing in various European dialects. This caused a geographical convergence of European languages and the ability to disseminate common laws in common languages, thus setting the conditions for state centralization. Additionally, a broad and secure means to communicate enabled popular mobilization, alternative ideas, cultural identity, the erosion of feudalism and nationalistic tendencies.<sup>6</sup> The nature of the information hierarchy no longer persisted as a top-down structure in which elites monopolized information to manipulate the uninformed. Information and ideas now flowed from the bottom-up and laterally. Despite its attempts to maintain control, an authoritarian regime ceded the advantage to the masses in the face overwhelming popular enlightenment brought on by the printing press.

## **Telegraph**

While the printing press presented an advantage for the oppressed, the telegraph favored authoritarianism due to the nature of information flow. Information only traveled point to point

with the receiver acting as the means to widen dissemination either up, down or laterally via other means. Telegrams were also cost prohibitive for most people thus ensuring state control. In fact, the British tightened control over their empire by expanding telegraph lines across international terrestrial borders as well as globally with the first submarine communications cable.<sup>7</sup>

Telegraph advocates espoused platitudes such as “It is impossible that old prejudices and hostilities should longer exist, while such an instrument has been created for the exchange of thought between all the nations of the earth.” Despite the hype, the telegraph possessed limitations that drew strikingly familiar criticism heard today with regard to the internet and social media tools. Cables were vulnerable to disruption and eavesdropping – mostly by the British who owned and operated most of the lines. Criminals exploited telegraph lines and operators for nefarious purposes.<sup>8</sup> And the masses remained reliant upon postal services via horseback or sailing ship due to cost or access to a telegraph office. This posed a significant disadvantage for aspiring revolutionaries. Slow delivery, government monitoring, and a lack of anonymity hampered mobilization efforts via mail. In the event mobilization was successful, the telegraph enabled a rapid government response. For example, in the 1857 Indian revolt, rebels overwhelmed British troops whose last telegraph alerted authorities throughout India of an uprising. The British were able to respond quickly and put down the mutiny. On the way to his hanging, one Indian rebel pointed to a telegraph wire and said, “There is the accursed string that strangles us.” Mutineers certainly understood the threat and attempted to cut wires, which only led to tighter authoritarian control and protection of the telegraph. The advent of the telephone failed to change this dynamic since the nature of communications remained the same as the telegraph - the only difference being voice communication rather than Morse code.<sup>9</sup>

## Radio

Short wave radio and broadcasting capabilities expanded government control through a top-down flow that transcended international borders and touched all audiences. This nature combined with authoritarian regimes' ownership and control over stations and broadcasts led to an informational advantage over the masses at home and abroad. Efforts to use the radio as an offensive information tool started with Radio Moscow in 1929; the first broadcast aimed at influencing international opinion. As tensions increased leading up to World War II, the Italians attacked the British in broadcasts, so London responded with an Arabic radio show to counter Italian propaganda in. Radio also facilitated the Cold War's war of words between governments as they vied for popular support on Voice of America and Radio Free Europe. These international broadcasts promoted western democracy, values and ideals in order to counter Soviet Communist propaganda,<sup>10</sup> and reassure Soviet bloc dissidents that the West remained friendly and supported them. The U.S. also sought to force the Soviets to expend resources on countering the U.S. message, which met with some success.<sup>11</sup>

Since World War II, authoritarian regimes have flooded the airwaves with radio broadcasts aimed at domestic adversaries. European Jews and the Rwandan Tutsi tribe experienced massive genocide due to radio broadcasts that inflamed ethnic hatred.<sup>12</sup> The era of guerilla radio also appeared. Egyptian dissidents established the Voice of the Arabs radio broadcast in the early 50's to promote radical social changes and revolution among the illiterate masses against the Egyptian monarchy. Dissident clandestine broadcasts also came into fashion as well as guerillas targeting radio stations for destruction or control in order to attack the government on the airwaves, disseminate their own message and deny the government a mouthpiece.<sup>13</sup> Dissident attempts were typically short-lived due to swift government military

action, jamming, or power disruptions. Therefore, government influence over an uninformed or illiterate population persisted while dissidents were relegated to mass-produced pamphlets or secret meetings to coordinate, recruit, and mobilize.

The printing press remains the most powerful anti-authoritarian information tool in western history. Widespread access to books led to the spread of ideas, literacy, knowledge, understanding and critical thinking. This overwhelmed the Catholic Church's defenses and ultimately its authority. The advantage arguably remained with the people until the telegraph and radio since the government typically controlled these capabilities either due to costs or through strict government ownership and regulation. Radio inventor Marconi said "the coming of the wireless era will make war impossible, because it will make war ridiculous." Despite this hope, the information advantage remained with authoritarian powers. Much like the church before the printing press, regimes could pummel the masses with mind-numbing propaganda and intimidation on a daily basis. Has the pendulum swung back to the people with the advent of the internet and social media tools?

## **The Nature And Impact Of The Internet And Social Media Tools**

### **Nature**

The internet began in 1969 as a Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) experiment in the military's computer research program.<sup>14</sup> Known as ARPAnet, it linked universities and research centers funded by the Department of Defense (DoD) with the first e-mail program emerging in 1972. The DoD used ARPAnet until MILnet came on line in 1982 while ARPAnet evolved into today's commercial internet. This "network" initially performed like a telephone or telegraph with point to point communication dominated by the government. But as technology progressed with RAND Corporation's packet switching,<sup>15</sup> the development of

Transmission Control Protocol/Internet (TCP/IP), and a common network language, more information could be exchanged much quicker and on a global scale. Internet spread rapidly as user friendliness increased with the world wide web, web browsers, websites, hyperlinks, chat rooms, and software development.<sup>16</sup> If one had to choose the internet's historical equal, the printing press is the obvious choice. Information flows freely top-down, bottom-up, and laterally in a non-hierarchical fashion-but at the speed of the telegraph. Even the internet's uses resemble those of the printing press. Therefore, one *could* make the argument that the internet is destined to facilitate the downfall of authoritarianism just like the printing press.

### **Impact**

The internet and social media tools significantly improved society through increased opportunities in business, industry, education, social networking, as well as increased military and government efficiency.<sup>17</sup> However, their impact on the spread of democracy and potentially facilitating the downfall of authoritarianism remains a hotly debated topic between advocates and skeptics. The debate is worth discussion since it provides a broader understanding of the limitations and advantages in leveraging cyberspace for national security purposes. This also sets the stage for a follow on discussion on authoritarian regimes' ability to leverage cyberspace to facilitate continued control.

Cyber-utopians support the idea that sharing information is inherently democratic and leads to greater understanding. "Blogs give a voice to those who would not otherwise be heard" and leverages the wisdom of the masses. Information also finds its way to the media faster than any other outlet rather than remaining unexposed.<sup>18</sup> One can further extrapolate from this that exposed government wrongdoing forces accountability and loosens the grip of corruption or authoritarianism. Therefore the internet and social media (via mobile phone or computer access)

serve as catalysts for political change from the bottom-up. One example cited by utopians is an enraged Filipino public that quickly organized via text messaging over a period of one week resulting in a million-man demonstration in the Philippines. Indeed, former President Estrada blamed “the text messaging generation” for his downfall.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, one may also conclude that Estrada used Twittering youth as a scapegoat to deflect attention away from unpopularity or poor performance. The “global conversation online” certainly bodes well for greater understanding amongst cultures and a more peaceful human condition according to the cyber-utopians.<sup>20</sup> But this also assumes the masses have a desire to seek opposing viewpoints and trust the information.

Cyber skeptics contend that the internet and social media have no impact at all on authoritarianism or the ability to mobilize revolutionaries. Malcolm Gladwell, a prominent skeptic, argues “people protested and brought down governments before Facebook was invented.”<sup>21</sup> Personal relationships with a hierarchy and identifiable leaders bring down governments, not an unstructured network of bloggers, Facebook acolytes, and Twitter addicts. Furthermore, online activism is a tool for the lazy who “like” an idea on Facebook, believe they have contributed and feel good about their support without endangering themselves on the street. These online “acquaintances” result in “weak ties that seldom lead to high risk activism.”<sup>22</sup> A sense of anonymity and strength in numbers also provides a feeling of safety from government retribution.<sup>23</sup> If skeptics are correct and the internet and social media do not matter, why would authoritarian regimes expend significant resources to restrict access, monitor activity, or shut down access? This is reminiscent of Soviet attempts to shut down western radio broadcasts. Of course, there is more to the argument.

Some skeptics take a more pragmatic approach and provide some middle ground. They concede that the internet and social media sites are tools in the revolutionaries' toolkit.<sup>24</sup> But they contend that random people doing random things on the internet do not spontaneously meet online and spark a revolutionary movement. Furthermore, the internet's decentralized networks crowded with clusters of likeminded individuals will not succeed. Social movements require a credible leader with a centralizing agenda.<sup>25</sup> The attention placed on the internet, Twitter and Facebook during the Arab spring and its role in political change will fade, just like the fax and copy machine in Ayatollah Khomeini's activities leading up to the Iranian revolution. History will also reveal the Egyptian revolution as a reaction to decades of authoritarianism and corruption, not "a flash in the pan" event brought on by technology. Dissidents just happened to use Facebook because that is where everyone was talking.<sup>26</sup>

As with many debates, very few prevail in an all or nothing argument. The truth typically lies within a wide gray area in which human interaction is played out in a dynamic fashion. Indeed, Wael Ghonim's account of his experiences as a Facebook organizer during the 2010 Egyptian uprising may overstate the role of social media. After all, as a Google employee, his biases certainly undermine his belief that Facebook brought down a government. But if one were to look at this situation in a pragmatic manner, then one must also consider Ghonim's arrest and detainment by Egyptian security due to his online dissident activities.<sup>27</sup> His modest online protest against police brutality certainly resulted in a large mobilization offline. The larger anti-regime movement materialized when the Muslim Brotherhood, a well-known and organized political group, hijacked Ghonim's success and increased participation leading to an all out uprising and a dictator's downfall.<sup>28</sup> Without an organized group stepping in to organize the masses in the street, one can only speculate as to the ultimate outcome of Ghonim's online activism. The point

is that despite the utopians' and skeptics' academic debates, the internet and social media tools contribute to complex actions and reactions that cannot be predicted nor ignored by authoritarian regimes. The threat to authoritarianism is real, but the utopian belief that democracy and peace will prevail is probably a fallacy. Look at Egypt almost four years later.

### **China And Syria: A Strong Defense Is A Good Offense**

The U.S. National Security Strategy and recent senior policy maker public statements indicates a paradoxical belief that today's ICTs are the utopic tool destined to promote democracy if only everyone had free access to all information. Yet they also concede that ICTs pose a threat to national security due to a heavy reliance on cyberspace in the government, military, economy, national infrastructure, intelligence community, industry and several other critical institutions and services, both public and private. "Our digital infrastructure...is a strategic national asset, and protecting it...is a national security priority."<sup>29</sup> Considering the magnitude of concerns over security and a lack of control in cyberspace held by a democratic government such as ours, it is obvious that other governments would have the same trepidations. It is therefore easy to accept that authoritarian regimes share U.S. concerns, or perhaps more so since they must also defend against internal uprisings. A discussion of the online tit for tat between authoritarian regimes and their disgruntled masses in China and Syria reveals several opportunities in cyberspace as well as challenges for authoritarian regimes.<sup>30</sup>

#### **China**

The Chinese Communist Party is an authoritarian regime bent on controlling society and quieting dissent through cyberspace. With approximately 40% (500 million) of the population online, 66% of which are under the age of 29,<sup>31</sup> China provides rich ground for any case study to

determine an authoritarian regimes' defensive and offensive uses and challenges in leveraging the internet and social media.

### **Defensive Uses**

Not surprisingly, most Chinese internet users search on topics such as pop culture, national pride, and personal finances rather than anti-government activities.<sup>32</sup> However, lack of political interest by online users' does not fully explain the failure of a new era of democracy in Communist China brought on by cyber utopia. An extensive government defensive toolkit poses the most likely answer. The regime's first line of defense is to isolate the populace from the global worldwide web with a two-tiered network infrastructure. International internet connectivity is limited to a "small number of state-controlled backbone networks." Public internet service providers then connect to the government-controlled networks. This arrangement enables the Party to monopolize content and monitor domestic use while allowing the regime worldwide access for exploitation and offensive attacks on foreign networks. This system is not perfect. Various ministries, for example those in charge of education and media, control different international backbone connections. This causes turf disputes and poor coordination over acceptable content leading to less effective control.<sup>33</sup> In addition, over 60 regulations are supposedly enforced by at least twelve local, regional and national agencies. This oversight intimidates people into self-censorship since violators face harsh punishments. But in reality, this ploy is to relieve the regime from blocking so many sites or chasing down violators.

### **Offensive Uses**

To battle increased access, China has several offensive tools. The regime employs an army of bloggers that propagate traditional Marxists ideals and counter online dissent.<sup>34</sup>

The government also uses surveillance tools to monitor online activity and to identify and track dissidents.<sup>35</sup> Due to an inability to control user content and search for anti-government terms on Facebook and Twitter, the regime attempted to these site. Despite this, 330 million Chinese citizens still have Twitter accounts, and 65 million are on Facebook.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, China went on the offense by introducing its own version of Twitter – Sina Weibo. Sina Weibo is not only monitored but this homegrown tool also allows the regime to delete accounts if users are engaged in dissident conversations.<sup>37</sup> The regime also prohibits online groups, resulting in micro-blogs, along with topics related to Falun Gong, Uighur nationalism, and human rights abuses.<sup>38</sup>

## **Challenges**

China's authoritarian regime walks a tightrope between maintaining information dominance over the masses and making concessions to preserve order and promote economic growth. As a result, internet and social media pose several challenges that could overwhelm regime defenses. Challenges to good order revolve around bloggers who have successfully raised national level attention on issues forbidden in state-controlled media before censors can shut down conversations. In some cases, they have successfully mobilized online and then moved offline as well as forced the regime to answer to charges of government corruption, lies, cover-ups, and lax safety standards. The important caveat to this is that local or regional government is characterized as the culprits, while the Communist elite at the national level garners popular legitimacy.<sup>39</sup> Due to the amount and diversity of opinions and online users and pent up energy, China appears to be allowing more freedom of speech as a release valve. However, the primary motive is to maintain constant surveillance in order to understand potential enemies of the state and anticipate problems.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, websites sponsored by the diaspora or U.S. government agencies remain outside China's control. Chinese nationalism espoused by the diaspora threatens

the party's message and has proven to be a flashpoint for offline mobilization in China.

Therefore, the regime must respond to foreign propaganda or accusations in a continuous war of words or sanction the People's Liberation Army in hacking operations on dissident websites.

Keen economic drivers also present a challenge for China. Its booming media industry, globalization and a desire for economic growth have forced the regime to expand access and relax restrictions.<sup>41</sup> For example, World Trade Organization membership requires foreign investment and freer communications networks. China also strives to update antiquated government administration through the use of "government online" projects to improve efficiency and promote online programs to combat poverty.<sup>42</sup>

Netizen attempts to use circumvention technologies and code words are typically defeated by agile government restrictions and censorship.<sup>43</sup> However, once a message makes it to the masses, China's leaders' face surmounting challenges in containing it.<sup>44</sup> As access grows, the regime accepts greater risk in maintaining control of social dissent with over 1.3 billion Chinese citizens. Just as the printing press facilitated the Catholic Church's demise, the internet and social media may enable slow but significant change in China.

## **Syria**

The Syrian government uses similar offensive and defensive means as China in its crackdown on internet usage in order to deter online recruitment and mobilization, as well as locate oppositionists for arrest. Even before Syria's brutal civil war, the regime controlled the internet, social media tools and telecommunications with an iron fist. Tight control is enabled by the regime and its cronies' private ownership of all telecommunications in Syria. As a result, internet access is available in a relatively small geographic area. About 20% (or 4.5 million) Syrians have access which is 15% less than the average regional penetration rate. However, even

if half of all internet users sympathetic to the opposition mobilized, this could still present a serious concern for the regime.<sup>45</sup>

### **Defensive Uses**

With a civil war raging and oppositionist groups seeking the overthrow of the current authoritarian regime, it is not surprising that Syria imposes strict defensive measures to suppress online dissident recruitment and mobilization. Although Syria's network infrastructure is not as sophisticated as China's, Syria's defensive measures are very effective. The regime is aggressive in censorship, intermittent or total blocks on email, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, as well as anti-regime sites or blogs.<sup>46</sup> Instead of elaborate technological solutions, Syria may simply implement statewide outages or reduces network speed to prevent large data file transfers or downloads. Internet and cell outages occur during high tensions or on Fridays during prayer since the mosque is typically the catalyst for demonstrations. This reflects not only a cultural norm, but also practicality. With internet and cell disruptions, the mosque presents the best opportunity to meet and mobilize.<sup>47</sup>

### **Offensive Uses**

Syria's offensive capabilities improved since its civil war began - most likely with Iranian assistance. For example, the regime occasionally enables access to blocked social media sites to identify and target dissidents for arrest – a tactic used by the Iranian regime in 2009 during the Green Movement demonstrations. Other regime offensive measures are implemented by the "Syrian Electronic Army." This group acts as the online propaganda mouth for the regime while attacking the opposition. They may also disrupt dissident internet access and deface anti-regime sites. This group also aggressively phishes for personal data in or to target oppositionists. They also engage in a "tit for tat campaign" with online dissidents who engage in the same

activities for the opposition.<sup>48</sup> Just as in China, self-censorship occurs since users are required to use real names and national identification numbers to log in at internet cafes. Violators are easily identified and routinely arrested. Laptops owners are regularly treated as dissidents. Security forces confiscate their computers and beat them in order to deter and disrupt internet mobilization.<sup>49</sup>

## **Challenges**

Unlike Chinese activists looking for government concessions, Syrian oppositionists focus on drawing international attention for their plight in the ongoing civil war. Despite government efforts, a core group of online leaders have succeeded in uploading data to YouTube to highlight human rights abuses and seek support for the opposition.<sup>50</sup> Online groups and netizens enabled oppositionists by providing anonymizing and circumvention tools to avoid detection or evade restrictions. In addition, approximately half the total population owns a cell phone with a camera. This has led to “citizen journalists” capturing pictures and videos with their phones in order to circumvent restrictions on media. These videos have the greatest impact in countering the regimes’ message when international mass media outlets such as Al-Jazeera expose the videos.<sup>51</sup> In a coup for the opposition, the U.S. even provided moral support by sanctioning individuals, government entities, and corporations responsible for enabling the Syrian regimes’ use of the Internet to prevent dissent. This was prompted by possible human rights abuses facilitated by network monitoring and tracking.<sup>52</sup>

The Syrian case provides great insight on both the regime and dissidents’ use of ICTs during uprisings. Even though the Syrian regime implements aggressive offensive and defensive measures to disrupt online dissidents, the strategy is not full proof. Oppositionists circumvent the government through the use of old technology. Regressing back to in-person mobilization at the

mosque and sending damaging pictures to the international media easily supports their objectives while they wage an online tit for tat with the regime when they are able to gain access.

Both China and Syria provide excellent case studies for the offensive and defensive use of today's ICTs. Syria's efforts result in total outages and brutality that forces dissidents offline for mobilization or sets them up for detection and arrest. On the other hand, China struggles with the dual-edge sword. The regime needs increased internet freedom and access for economic growth and governance, but this threatens their tight control over information and the spread of undesirable ideas. Authoritarianism in Syria remains strong despite online dissidents, however China's leadership wages a daily battle to control society as internet access increases.

### **Recommendations**

The U.S. stresses the importance of unfettered global access to all information on the internet in order to promote democratic values. However, undermining authoritarianism in this manner presents several challenges in which risks may outweigh gains. Therefore the following key points should be considered:

First, undermining authoritarianism via the internet and social media is fraught with uncertainty. The China and Syria cases demonstrate that there is a constant online tit for tat between dissidents and the regime. As one side gains the advantage, the other adjusts. It is a delicate balancing act. If a third party attempts to tip the scales, the second order effects could be disastrous; especially if other unseen parties are providing support to one side or the other.

Second, regimes possess or can acquire the means to track dissidents online and off through mobile devices. If threatened by dissidents, they may respond with increased aggressive offensive measures such as Syria. Despite China's desires to enhance economic growth and

maintain legitimacy, brutality remains an option. This should be considered in any effort to actively assist a dissident in undermining a brutal regime.

Third, in any attempt to undermine a regime via cyberspace, a close study (call it intelligence preparation of the environment) its offensive and defensive capabilities and potential consequences may enable more precise tasks or reveal that no action should be undertaken. Specific tasks also enable a focused effort to determine effectiveness.

### **Summary**

Throughout history, ICTs enabled either the dissident or the authoritarian regime in gaining an advantage. Both the radio and telegraph favored regimes due to their top-down information flow and state control. However, the printing press enabled greater knowledge with information flowing in all directions across society. This led to literacy and alternative ideas that overwhelmed the Church's control its defensive measures. The internet and social media tools function the same as the printing press - information flows in all directions therefore, it should favor the dissident's ability to mobilize and undermine authoritarianism. This is not the case.

Today's version of the printing press is a dual-edged sword. The regime has the means, backed by the state resources, to defend and attack from cyberspace. China and Syria provide several insights on the tit for tat relationship between online oppositionists and regimes. While China seeks to maintain information dominance, it must relinquish some control to further economic growth and government administration. Dissenters exploit freedoms or circumvent restrictions to gain concessions from the regime rather than to overthrow it. It appears this careful balancing act works – for now. An appreciable advantage remains elusive until the regime perceives a tipping point that requires the full weight of its power to crush online dissent. This is where the Syrian regime finds itself today. The regime's aggressive internet and social

media tool censorship, monitoring, and tracking leads to offline targeting of online dissenters.

This gives the regime an advantage by forcing dissidents to mobilize offline and resort to older ICTs. These two cases clearly make the case that the internet and social media tools undermine the state, however the advantage remains with the regime.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Schectman, Joel, "Iran's Twitter Revolution? Maybe Not Yet," *Business Week Online*, 18 June 2009, <http://web.ebscohost.com.aufric.idm.oclc.org/ehost/detail?vid=4&sid=3bb51c3e-8325-48cc-84abe4efa8e51fbc%40sessionmgr11&hid=24&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#db=mth&AN=42008698> (accessed 7 Oct 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth C. Hanson, *The Information Revolution and World Politics*, (Lanham, MI: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 14-16.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 14-15.

<sup>4</sup> "Luther's 95 Theses", <http://www.biblestudytools.com/history/creeds-confessions/luther-95-theses.html>

<sup>5</sup> Hanson, *Information Revolution*, 15.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 15-17.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 18-20.

<sup>8</sup> Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), 276-7.

<sup>9</sup> Assa Doron and Robin Jeffrey, *The Great Indian Phone Book*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 25-6.

<sup>10</sup> Hanson, 30-33. *Information Revolution*

<sup>11</sup> Tkacheva, *Internet Freedom*, 182-3.

<sup>12</sup> Morozov, *The Net Delusion*, 278.

<sup>13</sup> Hanson, *Information Revolution*, 32-34.

<sup>14</sup> Hanson, *Information Revolution*, 59.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 57-8.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>17</sup> Hanson, *Information Revolution*, 60-2.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 89-90.

<sup>19</sup> Clay Shirky, "The Political Power of Social Media," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol 90, Issue 1 (Jan/Feb 2011), 28.

<sup>20</sup> Hanson, *Information Revolution*, 89-90.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew Ingram, "Malcolm Gladwell: Social Media Still not a Big Deal," *Gigaom*, 29 Mar 2011, <http://gigaom.com/2011/03/29/malcolm-gladwell-social-media-still-not-a-big-deal/> (accessed 29 Aug 2013).

<sup>22</sup> Malcom Gladwell, "Small Change," *The New Yorker*, 4 Oct 2010, [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa\\_fact\\_gladwell?printable=true&currentPage=all](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell?printable=true&currentPage=all) (accessed 29 Aug 2013)

<sup>23</sup> Nermeen Sayed, "Towards the Egyptian Revolution: Activists Perceptions of Social Media for Mobilisation," *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research* 4, no. 2&3 (2011): 275.

<sup>24</sup> Evgeny Morozov, "Facebook and Twitter are Just Places People Go," *The Guardian*, 7 March 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/mar/07/facebook-twitter-revolutionaries-cyber-utopians> (accessed 29 Aug 2013).

<sup>25</sup> Evgeny Morozov, "Why Social Movements Should Ignore Social Media," *The New Republic*, 5 Feb 2013, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/112189/social-media-doesnt-always-help-social-movements> (accessed 1 Oct 2013).

<sup>26</sup> Evgeny Morozov, "Facebook and Twitter are Just Places People Go," *The Guardian*, 7 March 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/mar/07/facebook-twitter-revolutionaries-cyber-utopians> (accessed 29 Aug 2013).

- 
- <sup>27</sup> Wael Ghonim, *Revolution 2.0*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 197-99.
- <sup>28</sup> Evgeny Morozov, "Facebook and Twitter are Just Places People Go," *The Guardian*, 7 March 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/mar/07/facebook-twitter-revolutionaries-cyber-utopians> (accessed 29 Aug 2013).
- <sup>29</sup> White House, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: 2010), 27-28.
- <sup>30</sup>
- <sup>31</sup> Olesya Tkacheva et al, *Internet Freedom and Political Space*, RAND Report, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2013), 95.
- <sup>32</sup> Ian Bremmer, "Democracy in Cyberspace," *Foreign Affairs*, (Nov-Dec 2010): 7.
- <sup>33</sup> Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor C. Boas, *Open Networks Closed Regimes*, (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003), 21-22.
- <sup>34</sup> Bremmer, 4.
- <sup>35</sup> Kalathil, *Open Networks*, 13-14.
- <sup>36</sup> Tkacheva, *Internet Freedom*, 95.
- <sup>37</sup> "A Twitter Knock-off Has China Talking," Bloomberg Businessweek, 21-27 February 2011, [http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/11\\_09/b4217039139980.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/11_09/b4217039139980.htm).
- <sup>38</sup> Tkacheva, *Internet Freedom*, 115-6.
- <sup>39</sup> Tkacheva, *Internet Freedom*, 102-4, 107.
- <sup>40</sup> Kalathil, *Open Networks*, 27-8, 30-1.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., 18-19.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., 22, 31.
- <sup>43</sup> Tkacheva, *Internet Freedom*, 95.
- <sup>44</sup> Kalathil, *Open Networks*, 32-4.
- <sup>45</sup> Tkacheva, *Internet Freedom*, 74-5.
- <sup>46</sup> Tkacheva, *Internet Freedom*, 73-9.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid., 79.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid., 84-5.
- <sup>49</sup> Tkacheva, *Internet Freedom*, 84.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid., 81.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., 77.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid., 88.

---

## Bibliography

- Alterman, Jon B. "The Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted." Center for Strategic and International Studies. The Washington Quarterly (Fall 2011): 103-116.
- Bremmer, Ian. "Democracy in Cyberspace." Foreign Affairs. Nov-Dec 2010, 7.
- Bryant, Elizabeth. "The Iron Fist vs. the Microchip." Journal of Strategic Study. Vol 5, Issue 2 (2012): 1-26.
- Carpenter, Charli and Drezner, Daniel W. "International Relations 2.0: The Implications of New Media for an Old Profession." International Studies Perspectives (2010): 255-272.
- Clinton, Hilary. "Remarks on Internet Freedom." Address. The Newseum, Washington, DC, 21. January 2010. <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/01/135519.htm>.
- Corman, Steven R. and Hitchcock, Steven. "Media Use and Source Trust among Muslims in Seven Countries: Results of a Large Random Sample Survey." Journal of Strategic Security 6, no. 4 (2013): 25-43.
- Doron, Assa and Robin Jeffrey. The Great Indian Phone Book. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013.
- Ghonim, Wael. Revolution 2.0. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012.
- Gladwell, Malcom. "Small Change." The New Yorker, 4 Oct 2010, [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa\\_fact\\_gladwell?printable=true&currentPage=all](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell?printable=true&currentPage=all) (accessed 29 Aug 2013)
- Hounshell, Blake. "The Revolution Will Be Tweeted." Foreign Policy. Issue 187 (Jul/Aug 2011) 20-21.
- Ingram, Matthew. "Malcolm Gladwell: Social Media Still not a Big Deal." Gigaom, 29 Mar 2011, <http://gigaom.com/2011/03/29/malcolm-gladwell-social-media-still-not-a-big-deal/> (accessed 29 Aug 2013).
- Hanson, Elizabeth C. *The Information Revolution and World Politics*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008.
- Haywood, Trevor. *Info-Rich – Info-Poor*. United Kingdom: Bowker-Saur, 1995.
- Kalathil, Shanthi and Boas, Taylor C. *Open Networks Closed Regimes*. Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003.
- Khamis, Sahar and Vaughn, Catherine. "We Are All Khaled Saed: The Potentials and Limitations of Cyberactivism in Triggering Public Mobilization and Promoting Political Change." *Journal of Arab and Muslim Media Research*. Vol. 4, Number 2 and 3 (2011): 145-163.
- Lim, Merlyna. "Clicks, Cabs and Coffeehouses: Social Media and Opposition Movements in Egypt, 2004-2011." *Journal of Communication*. (2012): 231-248.
- Morozov, Evgeny. "Facebook and Twitter are Just Places People Go." *The Guardian*, 7 March 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/mar/07/facebook-twitter-revolutionaries-cyber-utopians> (accessed 29 Aug 2013).
- Morozov, Evgeny. "Why Social Movements Should Ignore Social Media." *New Republic*, 5 Feb 2013. <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/112189/social-media-doesnt-always-help-social-movements> (accessed 1 Oct 2013).
- Morozov, Evgeny. "The Net Delusion." New York: Public Affairs, 2011.
- National Security Strategy*. Washington, DC: The White House, May 2010.
- Nermeen, Sayed. "Towards the Egyptian Revolution: Activists Perceptions of Social Media for

- 
- Mobilisation.” *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research* 4, no. 2&3. (2011): 273-298.
- Schectman, Joel. “Iran's Twitter Revolution? Maybe Not Yet.” *Business Week Online*. (18 June 2009) <http://web.ebscohost.com.aufric.idm.oclc.org/ehost/detail?vid=4&sid=3bb51c3e-8325-48cc-84abe4efa8e51fbc%40sessionmgr11&hid=24&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#db=mth&AN=42008698> (accessed 7 Oct 2013).
- Schmidt, Eric. “The Digital Disruption.” *Foreign Affairs*. Vol 89, Issue 6 (Nov/Dec 2010): 75-85.
- Shirky, Clay. “The Political Power of Social Media.” *Foreign Affairs*. Vol 90, Issue 1 (Jan/Feb 2011): 28-41.
- Shirky, Clay. “Here Comes Everybody.” Looking for this; touted as antithesis to Gladwell.
- Shirky, Clay and Galdwell, Malcolm. “From Innovation to Revolution.” *Foreign Affairs*. (Mar/Apr 2011): 153-154.
- Tkacheva, Olesya et al. *Internet Freedom and Political Space*. RAND Report. Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2013.
- Tufekci, Zeynep and Wilson, Christopher. “Social Media and the Decision to Participate in Political Protest: Observations from Tahrir Square.” *Journal of Communication*. (2012): 363-379.
- U.S. House of Representatives. “What Hath God Wrought.” Washington, DC: Office of the Historian. <http://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/Electronic-Technology/Telegraph/>.

